

Ways Managers Can Help Promote a Safe Workplace

Overview

Ways managers can help promote a safe workplace.

- Communicate a “safe workplace” message
- Put workplace violence in perspective
- Review safety procedures with employees
- Be aware of “stress triggers”
- Address conflicts and concerns promptly
- Respond promptly to threats, harassment, and misconduct
- Provide assistance to victims of domestic abuse
- Learn to recognize the warning signs of violence
- Maintain a harassment-free workplace

Encouraging open communication and providing employees with support and clear guidelines on behavior that promotes a positive, respectful, and safe workplace is part of every manager’s job. Managers play a decisive role in promoting a safe workplace and have a responsibility to actively address behaviors that undermine a safe work environment.

Communicate a “safe workplace” message

Make it clear that promoting a safe workplace is everyone’s job.

- *Communicate to employees that your company has a “zero tolerance for violence” policy.* Explain what that means. Make it clear that you personally support and follow this policy. Discuss your company values.
- *Let employees know what behaviors will not be tolerated.* Define what behaviors are unacceptable -- sexual harassment and other forms of harassment, threats, assaults, bullying, offensive humor, and other aggressive behaviors. Explain what the consequences will be for these behaviors, including discipline, job suspension, or termination.
- *Explain that hostile, offensive, and demeaning language in the workplace is not acceptable.* It creates an unpleasant environment for everyone.
- *Commit to an open-door communication policy.* Make sure that all your employees understand that they are free to come to you at any time with any questions and concerns. Review this with each new employee. You want to promote a work environment where your employees are comfortable talking with you about all kinds of issues if you want them to feel comfortable telling you about safety concerns they may have involving a co-worker.

Put workplace violence in perspective

Most companies are safe and comfortable places to work. However, according to national crime statistics, over 2 million assaults and serious threats involving American workers occur each year. By some estimates, nearly 75 percent of violent attacks are attempted or carried out by outside criminals. Most violent actions come from:

- outsiders such as robbers or criminals with no direct connection to the company
- non-employees with some type of relationship with an employee, such as an irate or abusive spouse or family member

Disgruntled employees or former employees also account for a small percentage of violent acts in the workplace.

Review safety procedures with employees

Promoting a safe workplace means educating all employees about safety awareness and policies. To do this effectively, you need to work closely with your human resources (HR) department so that you clearly understand all of your company's policies and procedures. Make sure you keep up to date and attend any company training programs that focus on workplace safety.

- *Educate employees on the importance of following standard safety procedures.* Make sure they know to whom they should report suspicious activity (for example, if they see a stranger in the building, a suspicious package, or an unlocked door that is supposed to be locked). Hold periodic reminder sessions with employees, as it is easy for them to take these kinds of ongoing, basic safety precautions for granted.
- *Educate employees about the importance of reporting safety concerns.* Instruct them on how to report threats and incidents of intimidating behavior. You can say to employees, "We all need to work together to keep each other safe. You all have a responsibility to report any safety concerns you may have. A professional will determine how to deal with the threat and what action to take." Emphasize that it's best to err on the side of caution. You might say, "Always report an incident if you feel threatened for any reason by anyone inside or outside the organization or if you witness an incident where you think someone is at risk."
- *Work with your security department to make sure employees who are working late have a safe way to get out of the building and to their cars.*
- *Explain how to report incidents of harassment, intimidation, aggression, and other forms of disruptive or troubling behavior.* Refer to your company policy for reporting such incidents. If your company maintains a hot line where employees can make confidential reports about serious concerns, make sure that your employees understand it is available and how and when to use it. Check with your HR department to learn what kind of confidentiality is available for an employee making a report.
- *Review confidentiality policy and procedures with your HR department regarding employees who report concerns.* Employees are sometimes reluctant to report threats or safety concerns at work because they fear retaliation by a co-worker or they fear becoming the subject of rumors. It's important to let employees understand that all reported threats and safety concerns will be kept confidential. However, avoid making promises that you cannot keep regarding how that confidentiality will be maintained. For example, if an employee tells you something about another employee that relates to possible workplace violence and then says, "But don't tell HR," you do in fact have an obligation to tell HR or someone in authority about the incident. The more educated you are about confidentiality

procedures, the more help and assurance you will be able to offer to the employee who reports a safety concern.

Be aware of “stress triggers”

Job stress can contribute to workplace violence. While it’s not possible to eliminate stress at work, being aware of “stress triggers” can help you better manage and support employees.

- *Overload.* Are employees being asked to do more work than they can reasonably handle? Find ways to step in to reduce work overload. Be prepared to raise your concerns to your manager or HR representative if you feel that work pressure could negatively affect workplace safety.
- *Workplace change or job insecurity.* If your company is in the middle of a reorganization, employees may be worried about job security and their own futures. Encourage employees to come to you with rumors they hear so that you can address those rumors. Clear, honest communications about the situation can help reduce some of the tensions people may be feeling. Also, contact the program that provided this publication and speak with a management consultant about ways to address workplace safety issues, organizational change issues, or other management concerns you may have.
- *Co-worker conflicts.* You may need to intervene to show your employees how to handle conflicts. Do not tolerate ongoing conflicts on your team or between individuals in other departments. Talk with a management consultant about ways to deal with and resolve conflicts and to work on team building or interdepartmental cooperation.
- *Extra-long shifts or hours.* Talk with your supervisor about ways to adjust hours and schedules. You may want to set up a rotation where employees are able to work a shorter shift once in awhile if they need to.
- *Performance warnings or terminations.* Employees with performance problems are under additional pressure and need to be monitored carefully. Work closely with your HR representative to document inadequate performance and to provide employees with corrective feedback and opportunities to improve their performance. Maintain a firm, respectful, and compassionate demeanor with employees in these circumstances, especially with employees in the process of being terminated.

Address conflicts and concerns promptly

Some degree of tension and disagreement is a natural part of every work environment. But when personality conflicts get in the way of work, it is time for you to step in as a manager.

- *Do not ignore the problem.* Conflicts generally get bigger, not smaller, when they are left unresolved.

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- *Assess the situation.* Discuss the problem with your HR representative.
- *Follow up to make sure the problem is being resolved.*
- *Serve as a coach and role model on how to handle conflict.* Many individuals are uncomfortable handling conflict and do not have a good idea on how to effectively resolve conflicts in the workplace. You may need to provide your employees with an approach and serve as a role model. When employees do not understand how to communicate to resolve conflicts, the conflicts can escalate.

Respond promptly to threats, harassment, and misconduct

Failing to take action can jeopardize everyone's safety.

- *If an employee reports a threat, an incident of harassment, or another safety concern, follow up promptly and confidentially according to company procedure.* Contact a management consultant and your HR representative to discuss the problem. You can discuss disciplinary action, a mandatory referral to the employee assistance program (EAP), and other concerns with a consultant.
- *Take action right away if there is imminent danger.* A situation involving imminent danger will probably never happen in your workplace, but make sure you know who you should call if you encounter a violent confrontation. Have the appropriate phone numbers readily available near your telephone. Immediately contact security or law enforcement if there are immediate safety concerns.

Provide assistance to victims of domestic abuse

Research on workplace assaults shows that domestic violence is a serious workplace problem and poses risks to companies and employees if abusive individuals try to confront their spouse or partner in their workplace. Don't assume that domestic abuse is "not your business" or "not your problem." Here is what you can do to help an employee who may be a victim of domestic abuse:

- *Learn to recognize the signs of abuse.* Your job isn't to try to diagnose an abuse situation. But recognizing the signs of abuse can help you offer support to an employee who may be at risk. The signs include:
 - increased or unexplained absences
 - harassing phone calls at work
 - withdrawal from co-workers
 - unexplained bruises or injuries
- *Notify your HR representative and talk with an EAP consultant if you suspect an employee is being abused.* A consultant can help prepare you for how to talk about the problem with the employee. The consultant can also coach you on how to offer support, be understanding, and help the employee get professional help. The actions you take and the words you use can make a big difference in whether the employee seeks help.

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- *If an employee comes to you and says that he or she is a victim of domestic abuse, refer the employee to the EAP.* Remind the employee that he or she can call the EAP anonymously.
- *Talk with your HR representative about ways to offer the employee support.* For example, you might consider adjusting the employee's time or place of work, or offering paid or unpaid leave.
- *Work with security personnel concerning safety issues.* A designated staff member might circulate a photograph of the abuser to key personnel with instructions on what to do if the person enters the building. You might provide the abused employee with a security escort to and from the parking lot or offer to screen the employee's work calls or have his or her phone number changed.
- *Don't ignore the situation.* A domestic abuse situation can put everyone in the workplace at risk.

Learn to recognize the warning signs of violence

As a manager, you need to pay attention to any extreme and sudden changes in an employee's behavior and productivity. Most often, these types of changes in behavior are caused by personal problems that are unrelated to violence; however, occasionally even changes in concentration and punctuality or hygiene can signal a more serious developing problem.

People who commit acts of violence generally give off specific warning signs and exhibit an increase in unusual or inappropriate behaviors that escalate in severity. If someone exhibits any of the following signs, report your concerns to your HR representative according to company policy:

- direct or indirect threats of any kind
- ongoing, specific complaints or outbursts about acts of perceived injustice or conflict outside of work
- intimidating, harassing, or aggressive behavior, including bullying
- arguing frequently or having frequent conflicts with co-workers, customers, vendors, or delivery people
- telephone or e-mail harassment, including offensive jokes
- unexplained absences from the work area
- unwelcome sexual comments or advances
- excessive swearing
- an uncontrollable or explosive temper
- intense anger that doesn't go away

- stalking
- difficulty accepting authority or accepting criticism
- holding grudges
- symptoms of substance-abuse problems
- mental health problems
- ongoing, significant personal-hygiene issues
- sudden or marked changes in behavior or work performance
- bringing a weapon to work or having a fascination with weapons
- poor support systems outside of work -- few friends or family to rely on
- isolation or withdrawal from co-workers
- disputes over discipline or termination
- stealing from the company or other employees
- damaging company property or repeated safety violations

Whether there is a concern of potential violence or not, these are unacceptable workplace behaviors in any circumstance and require your immediate attention. You do not need to understand what is causing the behavior to begin to take action. Work with professionals to get the individual the help he or she may need. Do not try to counsel an employee or solve the problem on your own.

Maintain a harassment-free workplace

- *Respond promptly to employee suggestions, frustrations, and concerns.*
- *If you know that an employee is going through a difficult time, show your concern.*
Remind the employee that there is a resource available through work -- the EAP -- to turn to for help and support.
- *Encourage open communication among employees so that everyone feels safe reporting harassment, threats, and other concerns.*
- *Make sure every employee has the toll-free number of the work-life program or EAP to help with personal and work issues.*

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